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The Man Who Couldn't Say No

Max opened his eyes and saw above him a blue sky and a few white clouds. He was sprawled on parched grass in a shade thrown by a willow which protected him from the July sun. He touched his aching head and felt sticky fluid glued to his fingers. Blood. He checked if the bleeding was pulsing with his heartbeat. It didn't.

A subdural hematoma, he diagnosed his condition, for he remembered his head being struck by a hard object. His head was exploding, and he couldn't move for the pain was unbearable but he prayed that somebody would find him on this muddy road and alarm people in the village.

"Help me, help me, give me another chance. " He whispered to an invisible power, but turning to God for mercy after years of turning away was alien to him.

His father, a poor Lodzer shoemaker with a wife and many children to support, didn't have much time to attend a synagogue nor did he instill in Max faith or trust in God. Max could smell the acid odor of the old shoes, leather and glue in their small room where his father with a mouth-full of nails worked from the early hours of the morning till late at night. He sat in a corner, near the window, repairing old shoes. Max's two older brothers ,ardent communists , spent most of their time in jail and every year, before the First Day of May, the police came with a warrant to search their room for forbidden Communist leaflets but they left quickly eager to escape the irritating shoe fetor. The father suffered silently the ignominy of frequent police visits.

Max's education was completed at the fifth grade and he joined his father in the

corner, at the shoemaker's bench pounding nails into a sole. Even now he could hear the tapping of the hammer, short and intense while working on the women's heels and the taps stronger and longer on the men's soles. He could still feel the smoothness of the leather and the smell of sweat permeating from the old shoes.

Max was glad that he could move his hands, but his fingers started to shake and he put a hand on them to still them. When he lifted his head the pain was so intense that he lay motionless. His finger palpated crusts of the coagulated blood.

"Gdansk and Stetin are nearby and they have a good neurosurgical department. Some of my patients with subdural hematoma survived days and weeks without surgical intervention. How long will my luck last? My vitals are normal. " His pulse was strong and regular. Good! He was thirsty and he turned his head to drink the water from the bottom of the ditch. The water was bitter and putrid and he spat it out.

The white clouds on the blue sky changed their shapes in a perpetual motion and a cloud-house became a cloud- dog and the cloud-dog a cloud-ship.

"Papa" he said to the cloud and he could recall his father's voice from many years before.

He said, " Don't follow your brothers footsteps. They are believing in a chimera. As long as the world exists there have always been haves and haves-not, smart and dumb, beautiful and ugly people. There is no equality in this world and never will be. Go to France or to America if you want to improve your station in life."

Max didn't take his father's advice seriously for his father at the age of forty five looked like an old man and he'd never seen more than the end of his nose. He hasn't ever left the corner of his room in the slum-land of Lodz, called Baluty. He didn't exactly live in Lodz, he lived in a Jewish ghetto of Lodz. Only Max's brothers brought some excitement and hope into his life although they didn't earned much needed money or respect. The mother, a shy woman with eyebrows like two question marks as if asking herself how to feed so many mouths, was always busy. The three married sisters lived

close by but rarely visited their parents. The youngest sister, Esther, the late product of the seemingly asexual baby-makers, was a sickly and silent child who spent most of her time in bed looking at the ceiling and crying.

Max didn't want to move to France or America, nor hasn't he dreamed of trees, girls or movies. He had dreamed of going back to school, but it was as impossible as traveling to foreign lands .

He wanted to stop the cloud and say, "Sorry, Papa" and he felt that something wet was rolling down his cheeks. He tasted the saltiness of his own tears.

And then he thought of the farmers returning home for lunch who might find him in the ditch and take him to the hospital but he knew that the once German land hasn't been yet inhabited fully by Polish settlers. Max tried again to move but his head weighted a hundred painful kilograms. He wanted to scream, but inarticulate sounds, like a low throaty grunt of a frog came from his dry mouth and his tongue was glued to his palate. Ants started to crawl on his face attracted by the smell of blood, and big flies circled over his head. The air was filled with natural sounds, the twitter of birds and a soft hiss of the wind.

" Papa, it's nine years after the war. But what a nine years for me, Papa" he talked to another cloud, "I made it and at the age of thirty- two I am bleeding in my head in a dirty hole. I, a survivor of Lodz- Ghetto, Auschwitz and Buchenwald."

During the war, in Lodz -Ghetto his father warned him not to follow the Communist ideology and concentrate on survival. Max's brothers had flown to Russia and the room seemed to be larger since the workshop was liquidated and they all worked in factories. In this Jewish kingdom of poverty and hunger, in Lodz-Ghetto, Max and his family were now paupers among paupers. Their lot was even a notch better, for the father and Max were foremen in a shoe factory.

Max started clandestine Communist activity and the seductive fantasies of changing the world attracted the teenage sons and daughters of the ghetto elite .The

boys and girls were different from anybody Max had ever known and they were better educated and so much alike in their speech pattern and manners that even the grim life in the ghetto couldn't erase their intellectual distinction. Communism was a powerful magnet for them. Max was the only true plebeian and they looked up to him for guidance, but he couldn't keep up with their knowledge of history, languages and literature and he was embarrassed by his lack of erudition and his appearance. At five-foot –three he was shorter than the boys and girls and although he was at least four years older, he looked like their younger brother. Only his serious eyes and hands full of calluses depicted his age and working class origin.

His father said, " I don't like your comrades who have solid backing of their influential fathers. They're barely out of diapers and their stomachs are not as empty as yours. I want to give you some advice. Stay away from them. Besides, in the Ghetto we have only one enemy, the Nazis."

The leadership in the Communist cell was in the hands of two handsome boys, Nat and Richard. All members of the Communist underground followed them blindly , even Fela, the girl Max liked most. She had two auburn braids and many freckles around her small nose. Her light-brown eyes sparked during the collective book reading and political discussions. Max brought her books and pamphlets and sometimes soup in his tin-can and with a girl like her at his side he felt tall and strong. His Polish improved, he took better care of his clothing, but her mother gave him a vicious smile when he mispronounced a word and he heard her saying," What's ***He*** *doing here? Did* ***He*** *ever go to school? " She was a pharmacist and didn't tolerate lack of education, especially in her daughter's boyfriend.*

In the ghetto his family occupied a far place in his mind and the sickly Esther got on his nerves. He disliked the gloomy atmosphere at home and looked forward for the intellectual stimulation and feeling of friendship with his comrades.

Max closed his eyes, but the light filtered through his eyelids and he felt

nauseated. He checked his pulse again. It was strong but a little slower.

" I must open my eyes and look the cloud straight in the eyes, something I couldn't do in the summer of 1944."

Max left his parents house in July of 1944 during the liquidation of Lodz-Ghetto. His comrades decided to abandon their families at that critical moment and stay together hiding in the empty ghetto buildings. Parents and siblings were an unnecessary ballast from which they had to set themselves free. "Together we have a better chance to survive. We are young and we have each other, our parents are old and have little chance to live ." said Richard.

Max's father caught him at the door with the knapsack and asked, " Where are you going? Don't go out ,the Germans are still searching the buildings."

" I'll come back soon." Max lied, and the terrible thing was that his father had believed him.

A nausea started in the stomach while he recalled the joining of the group and leaving his family behind. He remembered the Communist group desperate search for a hideout and later capture by the Jewish police and the deportation. His mind seemed to be a little clogged for he couldn't recall how did it happened. After a while his brain functioned well again as he remembered himself and Fela in the cattle train going to Auschwitz where he kissed her for the first and last time.

She was crying, "How could I had left my mother? I miss her, Max. I'll never forgive myself for what I had done"

Max repeated automatically "We have each other, we shall survive."

He wanted to convince her and himself that they did the right thing and most of all to stop her sobbing. He aped the jargon of the party leaders and he never fabricated more lies in his life as in the train to Auschwitz, to the girl he loved .

Auschwitz? Max took a deep breath as if to exhale forever the sweet and pungent odor of the death camp. Fela was taken away and he was left with the

comrades.

. After a month Nat said "You should give half of your bread to me and Richard. We are the leaders and without us the social revolution in Poland may not succed, we must survive for the final victory of Communism ."

A piece of bread was life itself but Max didn't protest and every day gave one slice of his daily bread to Richard till his face and ankles puffed up with starvation fluid. He felt constantly cold and not a single fat cell was left in his body. He could barely walk, but luckily they were transferred to another camp where he got more bread from a Kapo for the shoes he repaired. They were liberated by the Russian army in the spring of 1945.

The ants were crawling now on his neck licking the blood. Max smelled a sharp urine scent which confirmed the fact that he was incontinent.

" My mind is intact, my memory flows in many directions, and all my senses are sharp and I still move my hands" he noted as if he had written a daily progress note in a patient's chart. He was thirsty and forced himself to drink the foul smelling water which evaporated a bit in the midday sun.

He could see clearly Fela's mother in the Freedom Square in Lodz, in July 1945, right after the war. She was unsteady in those worn shoes and came straight at him with a face deformed by hate and anger. " You, you murdered my daughter, she left me because of you. She would have had survived if she would have been with me in Auschwitz and not with hoodlums like you and you friends." She hit him several times with her small fist and he couldn't utter a word, not even to tell her how Fela cried for her on her last journey. The mother, he realized, will never work in a pharmacy again, for she was a violent , mentally sick woman. He saw her a few years later when he was a medical student making rounds in a mental hospital in Kochanowek. She didn't recognize him, and she seemed to merge with the wall she looked at.

" Fela" Max whispered to a slowly moving white cloud, and his upper lip

quivered " We can't undo what we did to people we loved."

In the spring of 1945 Max came back to Lodz . Nat and Richard got jobs in the militia and soon married nice, blond Polish girls. Within a few years they became party bureaucrats of less than medium importance.

Max's little sister survived. " Esther" he said, " I'll support you if you want to go to school." He intended also to say "we'll stay together forever" because her tired, dour and plain face and unsmiling eyes wouldn't attract men. At the age of twenty-one she looked like a proverbial old maid. Esther started a job as a clerk and Max passed the baccalaureate and was accepted into medical school.

Max lost a sense of time and felt coldness as dampness coming from the earth penetrated his body. The ants crawled on his face and neck like in a mad party, drunken from the abundance of vital juices.

My respiration is good, he concluded while taking deep breaths but the slow pulse bothered him.

Medical school was the happiest time in his life. He studied hard and didn't take a day vacation in six years. He met Vera, a fellow-student, who like Fela was slim, small with auburn hair. Here the resemblance ended, for very early in their friendship which turned quick into love, she demanded in her childish voice a dress for her mother or stockings for her godmother and since she had a big family, the requests increased in frequency. He loaned her money, not much, for he had a barely sufficient stipend, but she always forgot to pay him back. The love had a price but Vera was very affectionate and loving.

Max graduated from medical school and started his training in the best hospital in Lodz. By then Vera asked for more gifts and the love came to an abrupt end when he found a note in Esther's pocketbook, " Vera- 3000 zlotys loan, not returned yet."

He wasn't exactly sad or mad at Vera because his head was full of medicine. The professor who at the beginning opposed his residency in his department

looked with a curious eye at the balding Max who had "O" shaped legs, a sign of the childhood rickets and the wide hands of a shoemaker, which someone said he once was.

Max was also one of the best residents , not a gifted but a talented one, with a searching curiosity in medicine. The professor who had diluted Jewish genes took him under his wing, invited him home a few times till his blueblooded Polish wife told him, "I don't mind if you are expanding his mind in the hospital, but you're playing Professor Higgins to this young man, and he'll never master proper Polish. And he has to learn the fork and the napkin rules."

Max had thought of taking vacation when the Party secretary, a pat-you- on-the-back kind of a man, called him, "Comrade Wyszynski, there are several villages in East Prussia in a need of a doctor for the summer. We're delegating you for the job, for you're the best candidate. It will also make you more attuned to the health problems there." He talked about aims and goals in the returned Masurian land while a bottle of vodka was hidden in the drawer of his desk and four weeks vacation in the best hotel in the high Tatras, paid by the party, awaited him in a few days.

When Max told Esther all hell broke loose.

" He's sending you to this remote villages of East Prussia full of bandits, misfits and criminals of the worst sort. And they all hate Jews. You talk and look like a Jew and the Party bigwig delivers you straight into their hands. Let me go to this moron and talk to him."

Max felt a slight palpitation in the chest and answered, "No, that's an exaggeration. You have a tongue like a harpoon. I can't refuse his offer." An offer? It was a Party order.

" Max, you couldn't say no to your comrades in the ghetto and you left us to join them, you couldn't say no to the banana-boys when they demanded the life of you, in Auschwitz. The bread that you had given them could have had perhaps saved our

father's life. I'm talking too much, but don't stop me. Now's time to say a single syllable, ***no,*** *to the Party. "*

Max finished packing his few personal belongings and left the room. Esther was right , but how could he face the Party secretary who forced his admission into the Medical School and later into the best residency program? How could he look straight into his eyes and say, " I'm scared, send somebody else."

The secretary would never had admitted that East Prussia is the wildest of the wild West. He would have said in his best propaganda- voice of a thousand lies, "Max, it's 1954. We're free of all criminal elements and our enemies are killed or mortally wounded. East Prussia is as safe as Lodz. Would I have send you to the lion's den? Have fun in the Masurian land of hundreds lakes and buy yourself a boat. The salary is good and have a wonderful vacation. " He would speak in that mock-agreable tone of voice which usually meant: it's nice to talk to you, but **NO**, *don't count on me to change the decision. Once one felt the steel in his voice ,one was always aware of the steel even when he was being charming.*

Max moaned, for the headache was like a thousand little hammers pounding rhythmically in his head. He couldn't do anything to keep the bugs away and he knew that only a miracle could bail him out of the ditch. The hope of deliverance faded away when his premonition of doom didn't accelerate his heart beat.

"The intracranial pressure is rising and I can't move my right hand or foot anymore but I can still see the sky."

...

The two men were friendly when Max arrived in the Mazurian village. They looked at each other when Max started to talk and the shorter one asked mockingly, "Your name is Dr. Wyszynski, and what was it before?"

"Before what ? Always Wyszynski."

"Where are you from? From Nalevki?"

"I'm from Lodz and Nalevki is in Warsaw," Max said calmly.

The man in the black shoes must have hit me. His shiny, funereal shoes were about two sizes too large and too wide as if stolen from a corpse. He had a large, lanky frame, powerful hands and sharp, white canines that reminded Max of his father saying, " You can't housebreak a wolf." The short guy had squinty, shifty eyes and a strange sense of humor.

" Your first name is Max. It doesn't sound like a good Polish name. Perhaps Moishe would suit better? " He was fixed on names and smiled a lot. With the two men Max went to another village to examine patients and while walking on the dirt road he felt a sudden pain in his head and he heard a cool, level voice, " He's finito."

Max didn't feel pain anymore when a black veil of a cloud descended on his tormented body and he said, " Pa ..."

...

On the cemetery, in Lodz , the Party Secretary was in the middle of his speech when I arrived," We bury today a man who died a tragic death while serving our country and the cause of Socialism. He fell off a truck and crushed his head while on his way of bringing medical help to working people in small towns and villages of our Mazurian Land."

I was quivering with shame looking at mourners, as they remained silent, accepting the pompous declarations and fabrications from this habitual liar, accepting the worst verbal garbage that was shoveled at them. I saw in the Party Secretary a full display of a Nazi murderer transformed into a sloganeering Communist official who wanted to sedate, anesthetize and blind us before executing his own version of "final solution". The speech made abundantly clear that I am living in a bandit and racist state. Should fear of being a Jew become an unavoidable companion in my life? A master of my mind threatening to remove all life's joy, or worse, life itself?.

I have seen clearly that I must leave Poland, I have to abandon the city where I was born, raised and educated, I have to let wither my Polish language that I absorbed with my mother's milk and be "accented" for life wherever I'll go.

"Goodbye Max" I said when the casket covered with a red banner was lowered,

"Goodbye Lodz." My exodus has began.